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Television

TV VIEW

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A Tale of Domestic Terror Winds Up in a Muddle

"Under Siege" is about domestic terrorism, and it's both chilling and muddled. Americans get blown to bits; the Capitol is hit by rockets. The principal terrorist says, "My only goal is to teach — to educate America what it is to suffer as so many third-world people suffered so many times before." That's not the chilling part, however; what's chilling is that this is a three-hour made-for-TV movie on a major network, and that at the end of the movie we're meant to dislike not so much the terrorists as the United States Government. What's muddled (or most muddled; a lot of muddle-headedness is on hand) is the notion of where we can find recourse: A Washington newspaper will print the truth and this will set us free. You thought radical chic was dead? You're wrong. It's only moved over to television.

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The movie, on NBC at 8 o'clock tonight, mixes fact and fiction: a little of this, a little of that, and is the Secretary of State George P. Shultz or E. G. Marshall? He looks like Mr. Marshall, but early in the movie, or at least until he begins to get a little crazed, he sounds like Mr. Shultz. How do you deal with terrorism? "Retaliate swiftly, massively, immediately," Marshall-Shultz prescribes. And who in the Cabinet will oppose him? Reasonably well-informed viewers will get this immediately. Who else but the Secretary of Defense?

"We all know there's no military solution to terrorism," the Secretary of Defense says gravely. "Under Siege" seems to be pulling a fast one here. This Secretary of Defense may sound like Caspar W. Weinberger, but he's played by the black actor Paul Winfield. Actually, the NBC production is falling back on an old Hollywood convention. It is assumed there are not many roles for black actors, and so in the roles there are, the black actors must play sympathetic characters. The range for this, however, has always been limited in popular melodrama, and, as a rule, the characters are allowed only to be wise or to be victimized. "Under Siege" has two black actors in its large cast: Mr. Winfield and Stan Shaw. Obviously, Mr. Winfield's Secretary of Defense is wise. Mr. Shaw plays a swell guy who fought in Vietnam, joined the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and loves his wife and baby daughter. The Central Intelligence Agency shoots him dead.

And the President of the United States? He is Hal Holbrook, and although he does not look like Ronald Reagan, he speaks, I think, the way the people who wrote "Under Siege" — there are four of them — imagine he speaks. Is Iran responsible for the terrorism? President Holbrook is firm: "If they've declared war on us, that's what these bozos will get back." A little later, after the rockets have hit the Capitol, sending up a plume of smoke and fire from the dome, we hear President Holbrook at Camp David. He's terribly angry. "They bombed the Capitol, for crying out loud," he says. "I don't like it."

In fact, "Under Siege," even though it's trying to be just as up-to-date as can be, is really a 1960's movie. The references to the Ayatollah Khomeini, Colonel Qaddafi, Jimmy Carter and the bombing of American servicemen in Beirut are a facade. "Under Siege," slick, glossy, with drumbeats punctuating its score, knows who the enemy is: It's not the terrorists; it's us. The only real departure from the 60's is the choice of a hero. He is the director of the F.B.I., and, as played by Peter Strauss, he is a long way from J. Edgar Hoover. He is strong on civil liberties, for one thing, and for another, he can run like a deer. He chases a terrorist on foot. Up one street, down another; on a bus, off a bus; chase, chase; pant, pant. Mr. Strauss catches up with the terrorist on a railroad track, and when the terrorist blows himself up with a hand grenade, Mr. Strauss is knocked off a trestle. Unscathed, he goes back to work.

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Don't think for a moment, however, that "Under Siege" is only derring-do. It's trying to make a statement. Terrorism is a complex act, and things aren't what they seem. When a suicide bomber kills hundreds of soldiers at Fort Bladenburg, Md., the Director of Central Intelligence (Fritz Weaver) blames Shiite Moslems from Iran. Then three passenger planes are blown from the sky. The Joint Chiefs want to act, and so does most of the country. Only F.B.I. Director Strauss stands in the way. He demands proof that it's really the Shiites.

"He doesn't know how Washington works," the editor of Washington's most important paper (George Grizzard) tells the F.B.I. Director's wife (Victoria Tennant). Mr. Grizzard, an insider's insider, warns her that in Washington the way to get along is to go along. If her husband doesn't agree to retaliation, the Administration will hang him out to dry. Never mind here that a President doesn't need F.B.I. consent for a foreign operation. A 60's mental-

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